A Global Web of Chinese Propaganda Leads to a U.S. Tech Mogul

The Times unraveled a financial network that stretches from Chicago to Shanghai and uses American nonprofits to push Chinese talking points worldwide.

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The protest in London's bustling Chinatown brought together a variety of activist groups to oppose a rise in anti-Asian hate crimes. So it was peculiar when a street brawl broke out among mostly ethnic Chinese demonstrators.

Witnesses said the fight, in November 2021, started when men aligned with the event's organizers, including a group called No Cold War, attacked activists supporting the democracy movement in Hong Kong.

On the surface, No Cold War is a loose collective run mostly by American and British activists who say the West's rhetoric against China has distracted from issues like climate change and racial injustice.

In fact, a New York Times investigation found, it is part of a lavishly funded influence campaign that defends China and pushes its propaganda. At the center is a charismatic American millionaire, Neville Roy Singham, who is known as a socialist benefactor of far-left causes.

What is less known, and is hidden amid a tangle of nonprofit groups and shell companies, is that Mr. Singham works closely with the Chinese government media machine and is financing its propaganda worldwide.

From a think tank in Massachusetts to an event space in Manhattan, from a political party in South Africa to news organizations in India and Brazil, The Times tracked hundreds of millions of dollars to groups linked to Mr. Singham that mix progressive advocacy with Chinese government talking points.

Some, like No Cold War, popped up in recent years. Others, like the American antiwar group Code Pink, have morphed over time. Code Pink once criticized China's rights record but now defends its internment of the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs, which human rights experts have labeled a crime against humanity.

These groups are funded through American nonprofits flush with at least $275 million in donations.

But Mr. Singham, 69, himself sits in Shanghai, where one outlet in his network is co-producing a YouTube show financed in part by the city's propaganda department. Two others are working with a Chinese university to "spread China's voice to the world." And last month, Mr. Singham joined a Communist Party workshop about promoting the party internationally.

Protesters in Chinatown, London, in 2021. One of the groups that organized the protest, No Cold War, has links to Mr. Singham. Picture Capital/Alamy

Mr. Singham says he does not work at the direction of the Chinese government. But the line between him and the propaganda apparatus is so blurry that he shares office space — and his groups share staff members — with a company whose goal is to educate foreigners about "the miracles that China has created on the world stage."

Years of research have shown how disinformation, both homegrown and foreign-backed, influences mainstream conservative discourse. Mr. Singham's network shows what that process looks like on the left.

He and his allies are on the front line of what Communist Party officials call a "smokeless war." Under the rule of Xi Jinping, China has expanded state media operations, teamed up with overseas outlets and cultivated foreign influencers. The goal is to disguise propaganda as independent content.

Mr. Singham's groups have produced YouTube videos that, together, racked up millions of views. They also seek to influence real-world politics by meeting with congressional aides, training politicians in Africa, running candidates in South African elections and organizing protests like the one in London that erupted into violence.

The result is a seemingly organic bloom of far-left groups that echo Chinese government talking points, echo one another, and are echoed in turn by the Chinese state media.

Because the network is built on the back of American nonprofit groups, tax experts said, Mr. Singham may have been eligible for tax deductions for his donations.

The Times untangled the web of charities and shell companies using nonprofit and corporate filings, internal documents and interviews with over two dozen former employees of groups linked to Mr. Singham. Some groups, including No Cold War, do not seem to exist as legal entities but are tied to the network through domain registration records and shared organizers.

None of Mr. Singham's nonprofits have registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act, as is required of groups that seek to influence public opinion on behalf

of foreign powers. That usually applies to groups taking money or orders from foreign governments. Legal experts said Mr. Singham's network was an unusual case.

Most of the groups in Mr. Singham's network declined to answer questions from The Times. Three said they had never received money or instructions from a foreign government or political party.

Speculation about Mr. Singham first emerged on Twitter among self-described anti-fascists. Reports followed in the publication New Lines and the South African investigative outlet amaBhungane. The authorities in India raided a news organization tied to Mr. Singham during a crackdown on the press, accusing it of having ties to the Chinese government but offering no proof.

The Times investigation is the first to unravel the funding and document Mr. Singham's ties to Chinese propaganda interests.

Mr. Singham did not offer substantive answers to questions about those ties. He said he abided by the tax laws in countries where he was active.

"I categorically deny and repudiate any suggestion that I am a member of, work for, take orders from, or follow instructions of any political party or government or their representatives," he wrote in an email. "I am solely guided by my beliefs, which are my long-held personal views."

Indeed, his associates say Mr. Singham has long admired Maoism, the Communist ideology that gave rise to modern China. He praised Venezuela under the leftist president Hugo Chávez as a "phenomenally democratic place." And a decade before moving to China, he said the world could learn from its governing approach.

The son of a leftist academic, Archibald Singham, Mr. Singham is a longtime activist who founded the Chicago-based software consultancy Thoughtworks.

There, Mr. Singham came across as a charming showman who prided himself on creating an egalitarian corporate culture. He was unabashed about his politics. A former company technical director, Majdi Haroun, recalled Mr. Singham lecturing him on the Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara. Mr. Haroun said employees sometimes jokingly called each other "comrade."

In 2017, Mr. Singham married Jodie Evans, a former Democratic political adviser and the co-founder of Code Pink. The wedding, in Jamaica, was a "Who's Who" of progressivism. Photos from the event show Amy Goodman, host of "Democracy Now!"; Ben Cohen, co-founder of Ben & Jerry's ice cream; and V, the playwright formerly known as Eve Ensler, who wrote "The Vagina Monologues."

It was also a working event. The invitation described a panel discussion called "The Future of the Left."

A screen grab of the wedding website — Mr. Singham goes by Roy — with a scheduled panel discussion called "The Future of the Left." oneloveunionjodieandroy.com

Mr. Singham had a plan for that future. He had quietly funded left-wing causes while at Thoughtworks. But his activism was about to intensify. Six months after his wedding, he sold Thoughtworks to a private equity firm. A copy of the sale agreement put the price at $785 million.

"I decided that at my age and extreme privilege, the best thing I could do was to give away most of my money in my lifetime," he said in his statement.

The Network Takes Shape

While other moguls slapped their names on foundations, Mr. Singham sent his money through a system that concealed his giving.

At its center were four new nonprofits with dust-dry names like "United Community Fund" and "Justice and Education Fund." They have almost no real-world footprints, listing their addresses only as UPS store mailboxes in Illinois, Wisconsin and New York.

Because American nonprofit groups do not need to disclose individual donors, these four nonprofits worked like a financial geyser, throwing out a shower of money from an invisible source.

In their public filings, none list Mr. Singham as a board member or donor. "I do not control them," he said in his statement, "although I have been known to share my opinions."

In reality, Mr. Singham has close ties to all four.

The largest is run by Ms. Evans. The group's founding bylaws say that Mr. Singham can fire her and the rest of the board. They also require that the group dissolve after Mr. Singham's death.

Jodie Evans in Washington in 2019. She is a former Democratic political adviser and the co-founder of the group Code Pink. Leigh Green/Alamy

The other three groups were founded by former Thoughtworks employees, according to interviews with other former Thoughtworks staff members and résumés posted online.

In his statement, Mr. Singham acknowledged giving his money to unnamed intermediaries that fit the description of these four UPS store nonprofits. And several groups that received donations from them have identified Mr. Singham as the source.

One of them is the Massachusetts-based think tank Tricontinental. Its executive director, Vijay Prashad, recounted Mr. Singham's financing in 2021. "A Marxist with a massive software company!" he wrote on Twitter.

Tricontinental produces videos and articles on socialist issues. Mr. Prashad did not answer questions about Mr. Singham, but said the organization followed the law. "We do not and have never received funds or instructions from any government or political party," he said in a statement.

From the UPS store nonprofits, millions of dollars flowed around the world. The Times tracked money to a South African political party, YouTube channels in the United States and nonprofits in Ghana and Zambia. In Brazil, records show, money flowed to a group that produces a publication, Brasil de Fato, that intersperses articles about land rights with praise for Xi Jinping.

In New Delhi, corporate filings show, Mr. Singham's network financed a news site, NewsClick, that sprinkled its coverage with Chinese government talking points. "China's history continues to inspire the working classes," one video said.

These groups operate in coordination. They have cross-posted articles and shared one another's content on social media hundreds of times. Many share staff members and office space. They organize events together and interview one another's representatives without disclosing their ties.

'Hijacked' in South Africa

Several times a year, activists and politicians from across Africa fly to South Africa for boot camps at the Nkrumah School, set in a popular safari area.

They come to learn to organize workers and left-wing movements. Once on campus, though, some attendees are surprised to find Chinese topics seeping into the curriculum.

At a recent session, reading packets said that the United States was waging a "hybrid war" against China by distorting information about Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Xinjiang region where Uyghurs were held in camps.

The packets praised Chinese loans, calling them "an opportunity for African states to construct genuine, and sovereign, development projects." No mention was made of China's role in a recent debt crisis in Zambia.

"They're being rounded up to be fed Chinese propaganda," said Cebelihle Mbuyisa, a former employee who helped prepare materials for the workshop. "Whole social movements on the African continent are being hijacked by what looks like a foreign policy instrument of the Chinese Communist Party."

Those who objected were shouted down or not invited back, four past attendees said.

U.S. tax records show that one of the UPS store nonprofits, the People's Support Foundation, donated at least $450,000 for training at the school. On Instagram, Ms. Evans described a photo of the grounds as "Roy's new place."

The $450,000 was just part of Mr. Singham's efforts in South Africa. In all, the foundation has sent $5.6 million to groups that run the school; a news organization; and the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party, a fringe party launched ahead of the 2019 election.

Former party members said they were perplexed that, despite severe local unemployment and poverty, the party seemed interested in China. Mr. Singham, for example, urged them to attend an online lecture by a Chinese academic, Li Bo of Fudan University, an email shows.

After a party member called China's presence in Africa "a second colonization," leaders responded defensively in a WhatsApp group. "When it came to us questioning certain behaviors from the Chinese state, that was a no-no," said Lindiwe Mkhumbane, a former member.

In a statement, the party said its members have attended workshops on progressive issues but that it had never forced anyone to attend.

Mr. Singham also funded an online news start-up, New Frame, according to a recording obtained by The Times. One employee, Aragorn Eloff, said Mr. Singham interviewed him for a job.

The outlet hired talented reporters and paid them well. Readership was small, but the stated goal was "quality, not clicks."

Its former top editor has denied that New Frame had a pro-China slant. But a former reporter, Anna Majavu, said that an editor removed criticism of Chinese labor practices from a story on mining. "The resistance from the editor was purely political," she said.

And in June 2022, an editor, Darryl Accone, wrote a resignation letter criticizing New Frame's soft coverage of China and Russia. The "unavoidable conclusion," he wrote, "is that this is an ideological directive emanating from above and outside New Frame."

'Always Follow the Party'

Mr. Singham's office, adorned in red and yellow, sits on the 18th floor of Shanghai's swanky Times Square.

A visit shows that he is not alone.

He shares the office with a Chinese media company called Maku Group, which says its goal is to "tell China's story well," a term commonly used for foreign propaganda. In a Chinese-language job advertisement, Maku says it produces text, audio and videos for "global networks of popular media and progressive think tanks."

It can be hard to tell where Maku begins and Mr. Singham's groups end.

Nonprofit filings show that nearly $1.8 million flowed from one of the UPS store nonprofits to Maku Group. And in 2021, according to a Chinese-language news release, Maku and Tricontinental agreed to work with a Shanghai university to "tell China's story" in Chinese and English.

Maku's website shows young people gathering in Mr. Singham's office, facing a red banner that reads, in Chinese, "Always Follow the Party." Resting on a shelf is a plate depicting Xi Jinping.

Maku Group did not respond to a request to comment. After The Times began asking questions, its website went down for maintenance.

In 2020, Mr. Singham emailed his friends to introduce a newsletter, now called Dongsheng News, that covers China in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. Drawing stories from the state media, it blends lighthearted news with bureaucratic official prose.

Dongsheng's editors, in China, come from Tricontinental, but its address leads to the People's Forum, a Manhattan event space also funded by Mr. Singham. Dongsheng "provides unique progressive coverage of China that has been sadly missing," Mr. Singham told friends.

His ties to the propaganda machine date back at least to 2019, when, corporate documents show, he started a consulting business with Chinese partners. Those partners are active in the propaganda apparatus, co-owning with the municipal government of Tongren a media company that promotes anti-poverty policies.

The small, southwest city of Tongren might seem a niche topic. But organizations in Mr. Singham's network have published at least a dozen items about peasants there.

Code Pink

Ms. Evans, 68, was once a Democratic insider who managed the 1992 presidential campaign of the California governor Jerry Brown.

After the 2001 terrorist attacks, she reinvented herself as an activist. She became known for pink peace-sign earrings and sit-ins that ended with her arrest.

She helped form Code Pink to protest the looming war in Iraq. The group became notorious for disrupting Capitol Hill hearings.

Ms. Evans has organized around progressive causes like climate change, gender and racism. Until a few years ago, she readily criticized China's authoritarian government.

"We demand China stop brutal repression of their women's human rights defenders," she wrote on Twitter in 2015. She later posted on Instagram a photo with the Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei.

A demonstrator from Code Pink interrupted witness testimony during a House committee hearing in February. Anna Rose Layden/Bloomberg

Since 2017, about a quarter of Code Pink's donations — more than $1.4 million — have

come from two groups linked to Mr. Singham, nonprofit records show. The first was one of the UPS store nonprofits. The second was a charity that Goldman Sachs offers as a conduit for clients' giving, and that Mr. Singham has used in the past.

Ms. Evans now stridently supports China. She casts it as a defender of the oppressed and a model for economic growth without slavery or war. "If the U.S. crushes China," she said in 2021, it "would cut off hope for the human race and life on Earth."

She describes the Uyghurs as terrorists and defends their mass detention. "We have to do something," she said in 2021. In a recent YouTube video chat, she was asked if she had anything negative to say about China.

"I can't, for the life of me, think of anything," Ms. Evans responded. She ultimately had one complaint: She had trouble using China's phone-based payment apps.

Ms. Evans declined to answer questions about funding from her husband but said Code Pink had never taken money from any government. "I deny your suggestion that I follow the direction of any political party, my husband or any other government or their representatives," she said in a written statement. "I have always followed my values."

Few on the American political left would discuss the couple publicly, fearing lawsuits or harassment. Others said that criticism would undermine progressive causes. But Howie Hawkins, the 2020 Green Party presidential nominee, said he had soured on Code Pink and others in the Singham network that presented themselves as pro-labor but supported governments that suppressed workers. "To defend that, or excuse that, really pushes them outside what the left ought to be," he said.

Code Pink is not alone among left-wing groups in raising concerns about anti-Asian discrimination and tensions between Beijing and Washington.

But Code Pink goes further, defending the Chinese government's policies. In a 2021 video, a staff member compared Hong Kong's pro-democracy demonstrators to the rioters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6 that year.

In June, Code Pink activists visited staff members on the House Select Committee on China unannounced. In the office of Representative Seth Moulton, Democrat of Massachusetts, activists denied evidence of forced labor in Xinjiang and said the congressman should visit and see how happy people were there, according to an aide.

"They are capitalizing on very legitimate concerns in order to push this pro-authoritarian narrative," said Brian Hioe, an editor with New Bloom, a progressive Taiwanese news site. "And their ideas end up circulating in a way that affects mainstream discourse."

Chinese state media accounts have retweeted people and organizations in Mr. Singham's network at least 122 times since February 2020, a Times analysis found, mostly accounts connected with No Cold War and Code Pink.

This May, Mr. Singham attended the opening of a media institute in Shanghai. Organizers distributed tote bags reading "Communications as solidarity."

This photo, from the Chinese news site Guancha, shows Mr. Singham, front right, at a breakout session last month during a Chinese Communist Party forum. guancha.cn

A photo shows Mr. Singham sitting up front, next to Yu Yunquan, an official from a publishing group under the Communist Party's powerful Central Committee.

Just last month, Mr. Singham attended a Chinese Communist Party propaganda forum. In a photo, taken during a breakout session on how to promote the party abroad, Mr. Singham is seen jotting in a notebook adorned with a red hammer and sickle.

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